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Chapter 4

Meanings created in co-occupation: Construction of a late-life couple's photo story

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Abstract

Co-occupation refers to activities that require the participation of two or more people. While knowledge about co-occupation is expanding, few empirical studies have sought to advance the understanding of co-occupation in late life. The current study used interview data from one couple who participated in a longitudinal 2-year qualitative study among community-dwelling older couples plus photographs taken of them engaged in one of their most valued co-occupations: going for a walk together. The couple selected photographs, discussed the meanings they attributed to them and created a photo story. The photo selection and interview transcripts were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The findings consist of the couple's photo story and four themes that represent the meanings of this co-occupation: (1) Together but also individual; (2) It has always been like that; (3) Experiencing freedom and (4) Being eager to come across new things. The findings have implications for understanding the concept of co-occupation by bringing the importance of personalised meanings in co-occupation to the fore and by suggesting the importance of continuity of meanings of co-occupation for maintaining both individual and couple identities. Maintaining meaningful co-occupation might thereby contribute to health and well-being in late life.

Introduction

Life is full of occupations performed together with others, such as colleagues, sports team mates, church or choir members, friends and family. In occupational science, the concept of co-occupation refers to those activities that require the participation of two or more people. Knowledge about co-occupation has been based mainly on mother-child studies (Pierce, 2009), but Pickens and Pizur-Barnekow (2009) began to discuss co-occupation across the lifespan, suggesting that disruption to co-occupation may result from late-life challenges, such as health decline. Coping with these challenges in late life involves both partners in a couple adjusting (Berg & Upchurch, 2007), and it may have an impact on their occupations and co-occupations.

While knowledge about co-occupation is expanding, there are few empirical studies on the subject of co-occupation in older adults. This article seeks to contribute empirically and theoretically to the understanding of co-occupation in late life. It draws upon data from one couple who participated in a longitudinal 2-year qualitative study among couples, the Couples' Changing Everyday Activities in Ageing study (COCEA). The aim of the COCEA study was to understand how the everyday occupations of community-dwelling late-life couples change in the presence of health decline. In addition to the interviews in the COCEA study, one couple volunteered to be photographed to explore how they experienced and gave meanings to one of their most valued co-occupations: going for a walk together.

The following section presents the background to co-occupation and late-life couples and outlines how the concept of meaning was applied in this study. We then describe the method, followed by the findings and discussion sections which describe, interpret and use the findings to discuss the concept of co-occupation.

Co-occupation

There exist multiple definitions of co-occupation (Pierce, 2009). In the widest sense, co-occupation involves two or more people engaging in an activity such that each person influences the reaction of the other person. The conceptualization by Pierce

(2009, p. 203) represents this broad view, with the main characteristic of co-occupation being its highly interactive nature in which the activities of the people involved shape each other's responses. The interaction does not necessarily involve shared space, meaning, affect, intention, or time. In contrast, Pickens and Pizur-Barnekow (2009) considered that co-occupation requires more than interaction alone. They suggested that co-occupation is embedded in shared meaning and involves aspects of shared physicality, emotionality and intentionality. Empirical studies among adults lend some support to the aspects of shared physicality and emotionality in co-occupation (Mahoney & Roberts, 2009; Pizur-Barnekow & Knutson, 2009) and to shared intentionality (Mahoney & Roberts). However, to advance the understanding of the construct of co-occupation further empirical work needs to be done including people in later life.

Late-life couples

Focusing on co-occupation in later life is relevant, because late-life spouses engage in frequent interaction in their everyday life (Antonucci, Akiyama, & Takashashi 2004). Therefore, it is to be expected that they will also influence each other in their everyday occupations and co-occupations. Furthermore, many older people have to deal with health decline (Deeg, 2005). As a result of health decline, functional limitations may impact their abilities to perform co-occupations (Pickens & Pizur-Barnekow, 2009). Empirical research into co-occupation in late-life couples is limited, with only a few studies that investigated everyday occupations involving the participation of couples. Most of these do not focus specifically on co-occupation. However, studies that have investigated how older people with functional limitations and their spouses perform their everyday activities can be interpreted through the lens of co-occupation.

Performing everyday activities closely together has been found to be one strategy to cope with the consequences of dementia. In a study of 26 couples, in general the caregivers experienced their partners' strong need for nearness as burdensome. The increased nearness was perceived as an asset by the persons with dementia (Vikström, Josephsson, Stigsdotter-Neely, & Nygård, 2008). In a single case study, both spouses in a couple living with dementia perceived doing things together as

contributing towards preserving couplehood (Hellström, Nolan, & Lundh, 2005). Another qualitative case study that explored the everyday activities of an older couple after a stroke demonstrated the couple's everyday activities to be fully intertwined: the couple acted as a single entity. This was expressed in the metaphor of having one body, with three hands and two minds. The two minds referred to the involvement of both in steering the body and in experiencing the cooperation of the three hands. The couple perceived doing things together to have shared, but also separate meanings (Van Nes, Runge, & Jonsson, 2009). In summary, the findings of these studies contribute to the understanding of co-occupation in care recipient-caregiver dyads in late life. However, a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms and meanings of co-occupation requires co-occupation to be studied in more detail.

Meanings of co-occupation

Current understandings of the concept of meaning are based on the notion that in daily life people give meaning to situations, feelings and activities. In doing so, they interpret the value of their occupations (Christiansen, 1997; Erlandsson, Eklund, & Persson, 2011). Meaning in this interpretation is influenced by personal factors, but also by the socio-cultural and relational contexts that surround people (Hammell, 2004, 2009). Meaning might be particularly relevant when people need to adapt to changing life circumstances, such as health decline (Hammell, 2004). Furthermore, since specific occupations may hold multiple meanings which vary among people (Hocking, 2009), it may be the case that each person involved attributes his or her own meanings to a specific co-occupation.

The meanings ascribed to everyday occupations often remain hidden, because of the “unspokenness that lies in the everyday doing” (Reed, Hocking, & Smythe, 2010, p. 140). When focusing on co-occupation in more detail, it is therefore important to attempt to find a means to generate data about this unspokenness. Photos seem a valuable method for this (Hartman, Mandich, Magalhães, & Orchard, 2011). The purpose of the current study was to advance knowledge of co-occupation amongst late-life couples by exploring how one couple experienced and gave meanings to one of their most valued co-occupations: going for a walk together.

Method

Design

The theoretical background to our study was social constructionist theory, which considers meaning to be actively co-constructed in interaction with others and mediated by intersubjective dialogues and narratives (Gergen, 2009; Wicks & Whiteford, 2003). Against this background, a qualitative interpretative phenomenological study design (Eatough & Smith, 2008; Smith & Osborn, 2008) was developed to closely examine how co-occupation was experienced and given meaning. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) acknowledges that it is not possible to see inside another person's lifeworld, but that interpretation is needed to understand the experiences of that person. It is concerned with how participants construct meanings within their social and personal worlds. This approach is therefore in line with social constructionism (Eatough et al., 2008). Analysis in IPA is described as a two-stage interpretive process, or a double hermeneutic that involves the participants "trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world" (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 53).

Photography elicitation was used to obtain additional oral data. Photo elicitation involves using photographs to stimulate reflection during interviews. Photographs foster reflection because images stimulate different brain processes than words do. Thus, photo elicitation evokes a different kind of information than interviews (Harper, 2002) and may be useful to explore the meanings of occupation (Hartman, Mandich, Magalhães, & Orchard, 2011). In our approach, the photographs were taken by a semi-professional (the third author) and depicted the actual phenomenon under study by capturing a late-life couple's co-occupation.

The participating couple

Of the eight couples in the COCEA study, three couples volunteered for the photo project. Out of these, the couple that articulated a co-occupation that was suitable for photo elicitation was selected. Mr and Mrs Pieters, both over 80, had lived for

more than 50 years in the same apartment in the city they moved to following World War II. Mr Pieters had been a chemical engineer and Mrs Pieters was a primary school teacher. They were still in touch with some of her former school pupils. They had no children and few remaining family members. Both had declining health. Mr Pieters suffered from dizziness and Mrs Pieters had a condition that made it difficult for her to handle objects or walk. Mr Pieters now spent most of his time reading, and his wife still went to a painting class every week and was involved in an international women's organisation. After retiring, they had travelled widely, taken painting courses and both enjoyed walking in the mountains. They continued to enjoy going to museums and other cities as much as possible and going for walks together, but not as often or as far as in the past and they also tended to stay closer to home.

Ethical considerations

The Medical Ethics Committee at the VU University Medical Center approved the study. The couple gave individual written informed consent. Confidentiality was maintained by not sharing the individual interviews with the other partner (Forbat & Henderson, 2003). In addition to informed consent for the COCEA study, informed consent for the photography project was given with approval for the photographs to be used for scientific purposes, including publication in a scientific journal. Both spouses were aware of the fact that their anonymity was limited in the photographs. All data were securely stored and pseudonyms are used, which were chosen by the couple themselves.

Data collection

Data were collected in the context of the 2-year COCEA study, in which 6 interviews were conducted with the couple (Table 1). The COCEA joint and individual interviews were designed to facilitate the participants to talk about their current and former everyday occupations in their own words. All of the activities the couple talked about were considered to be their everyday occupations. When they spoke about occupations they did together, we considered these to be co-occupations. In other words, we did not set out using one of the definitions of co-occupation, but conceptualized co-occupation in a loose and broad manner. Probes were used: for

example, they were asked to describe their most favored occupations in detail. The interviews, lasting between 1 and 1.5 hours, took place in the couple's home and were transcribed verbatim.

Table 1. Overview data collection

	Year 0	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
COCEA (joint and individual) interviews	3	1	2	
Photo project data collections		2	1	1

One year after the first COCEA interviews, the photo project started. The couple chose the co-occupation and the location where they wanted to be photographed – a park. The couple, the photographer, and the first author went together for a walk in the park where 60 photos were taken. The photographer and the first author then selected 20 with the best aesthetic qualities. Colour prints (13 x 18 cm) were made of each photo.

In a session lasting almost 2 hours, the couple selected the photographs in answer to the instruction: "Please choose the photos that best show what going for a walk means to you." The selection took place in steps. The couple were first asked to select one photo out of two, then one out of two others and so on. About half way through this process, the couple asked to compare more photos at the same time and also if they could have another look at some photos that had not been selected in earlier stages. They now literally took over the process by moving all the photos to their side of the table. Towards the end of the selection process, the husband started putting the photographs they had selected in a sequence. When his wife asked what he was doing, he said he was making a story. They then turned to each other and began to quietly talk about what the photos meant and seemed to be touched by seeing the photos in this order. There were some, almost unspoken, indications (picked up in fragments of their talk and written down in field notes) that at that point they saw the photo story they had constructed as a metaphor for their particular life course. The full selection session was audio recorded and transcribed. Later, in one of the respondent validation interviews, the couple was invited to give titles to the photographs they had selected. Their reactions to this request were written down in field notes.

Data analysis

The findings from the COCEA study formed the background for understanding in the current study. In the COCEA study, the couple was the unit of analysis which involved comparisons between the spouses of one couple before comparisons across couples were being undertaken. There were three analysis phases: (1) the construction of a narrative for each couple; (2) a comparison of these narratives across the couples, and (3) longitudinal comparisons within and across the couples. The narrative of Mr and Mrs Pieters offered a preliminary understanding of the meanings of going for a walk together.

In the current study, the COCEA interview transcripts regarding going for a walk together were included in the new analyses, together with the transcripts of the photo selection process. The analysis was informed by the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach (Smith & Osborn, 2008). It developed an interpretation of the meanings of going for a walk together by trying to enter, as much as possible, the life world of the participants. To support the iterative development of interpretations, reflexivity was necessary throughout the process (Finlay, 2005). To support this, reflective notes on the first author's experience of the encounters with the couple and how her relation with the couple influenced the analysis and interpretation were kept in a diary. The analyses proceeded iteratively as follows: (1) re-reading the transcripts several times and developing initial codes, (2) re-visiting these codes with a focus on the differences and similarities between the two spouses' initial codes to obtain initial themes, and (3) connecting the initial themes to identify overarching themes.

Validity

Field notes, memos and a diary were used to enhance reflexivity throughout the project. Research team members supported the analyses by discussing the coding of the full transcripts and the intermediate analytic steps. In the course of the data collection for the COCEA study, respondent validation took place by asking the couple explicitly to give feedback on the results of the analyses of the first interviews. In the photo project, the couple participated in the analyses by selecting the photographs

themselves. Later, two informal respondent validation interviews were conducted to talk about the preliminary and final findings of the current study.

Data triangulation was obtained by using individual and joint interviews, observations and photographs. Furthermore, the iterative process enhanced validity because the results of the first analyses informed subsequent interviews, by providing the opportunity to develop questions to expand and verify the emerging analyses. Language translation was considered to be an interpretative act in which meaning might be lost or changed in translation from the original language into English. To obtain the best possible representation of the interpreted experiences of the participants, translation recommendations for qualitative research were followed (Van Nes, Abma, Jonsson, & Deeg, 2010). This involved that, in cooperation with a professional translator, translation of the Dutch themes and illustrative quotes was undertaken after the analysis was completed

Findings

This section first presents the couple's photo story, showing how the couple made sense of their experiences of going for a walk together. The meanings of that co-occupation are expressed in the photo story as a whole, rather than being conveyed by the individual photographs. This became particularly clear when the couple were asked to give each of the selected photographs a title. They thought of many possible titles, but explained that coming up with titles that described the meanings they attributed to the photographs was not possible. Mr Pieters said: *"You live the experience: it's a whole."* They both suggested that words would fail to express the wholeness of their experience of going for a walk together. In addition, they said that telling the whole story of how they experienced this co-occupation would require every one of the photographs they had selected and none could be left out. In other words: no photo alone could capture the complexity of the meanings. The expression 'you live the experience' comes very close to the expression 'lived experience' as used in phenomenology. Here, the couple's photo story *re*-presents how they made sense of their lived experience. Finally, the fragment in which their talk was barely

audible when they looked at the complete photo story in front of them suggested that, for a short while, they interpreted the photo story to represent their whole life together. They said:

He: Here you're going past, in passing [pause] that's a walk, ...no beginning, no end. She: You get here, here you went past, and then you're still happy [pause] about the things that have been [barely audible] [pause].

He: Or you're disappointed that you don't have it any more [barely audible].

She: But it's still something you've seen!!! It is something you've had, this is the path you have walked, and then you get here and then you go here, downhill [pause].

The couple's photo story

The photographs are copyrighted and not available for reproduction, under the terms of the ethical consent granted.

Interpretation

The photo story can be considered to be a visual representation of how the couple made sense of their lived experience of going for a walk together. A visual representation may contribute to authenticity but it also creates ambiguity because images are open to multiple interpretations. When it invites fresh insights, ambiguity may be considered something positive. On the other hand, ambiguity can also be seen as a drawback because it may leave too much room for interpretation. Providing an interpretative context may diminish this drawback (Eisner, 1997). Our interpretations of the meanings the couple gave to their experience form such an interpretative context. The interpretations result from the interpretative phenomenological analysis of the interview and photo selection data. This analysis was the second stage of the double hermeneutic process in which we made sense of how the couple made sense of their experiences of going for a walk together. Our analysis revealed four overarching themes. Each theme is presented below, together with a number of illustrative segments from the interviews.



Figure 1: © First Photo of the Photo Story

Together but also individual

For both spouses going for a walk together represented their togetherness. The photo showing them with their arms linked (Figure 1) was the first to be selected without hesitation or discussion. She said: *"I know!" [which one to choose]*. He reacted immediately: *"So do I!"* She: *"This one!"* He: *"This very clearly shows our..."* She [interrupting]: *"Our being together."* He: *"Our being together."*

When observing that in all the photographs they are walking at the same pace in step with each other (see e.g. Figure 8), Mr Pieters stated that not only is he doing that consciously to keep his balance, but he also referred to it as representing their synchronised pace as a couple: *"I think we've had a lot of practice over the years,"* to which she replied: *"I think so as well, [pause] we're walking at the same pace [as a couple]."* Later, she added: *"We're walking at the same pace, but not necessarily all the time, [pause] fortunately!"* This was demonstrated by selecting the photograph that shows them looking in different directions (Figure 5). She explained:

You do things together, you experience a lot of things together, but also individually. [pause] You experience things, you experience walking in the woods, nature and this shows that. [pause] You're [to her husband] looking at something different from me [pause]. That's also possible. We're together, but we also give each other space.



Figure 2: © Second Photo of the Photo Story

It has always been like that

Going for a walk together had been important for Mr and Mrs Pieters throughout their married life. In the past they had gone on long walking trips during their holidays, often in the mountains. When going on holiday, they only wanted to know the direction they would travel, but nothing else. Mr Pieters said that going for a walk was similar: *“That’s not something you do with a goal in mind. You go outside and just start walking.”* He added with some emotion: *“That’s how it always used to be.”* When commenting on one of the photos, he remarked: *“Here we’re going down the mountain.”*



Figure 3: ©Third Photo of the Photo Story

Nowadays, going for a walk posed physical difficulties for both of them and so it was something they really needed to do together. She explained: *"The best is if we walk together, the two of us, when we hold onto each other."* She repeatedly referred to her husband as *"...my walking stick."* For her, going for a walk was now: *"It's a matter of being tough...I walk to places, and it's something I still want to do. If I stay at home, I'll seize up."* Going for a walk also required more prior planning, simply because it took a lot of energy. She made sure she had a rest before they went out, and she also wanted to go to a park where there were benches to sit on, and said: *"I have to sit down a lot, and I think, good grief, this, this isn't part of it, this isn't what it's all about [using her hands to indicate that her head and body are two different things]. My head wants too much."* Later in the interview she explained that the experience of going for a walk still did not differ much from how it had been in the past: *"When I'm sitting down I can still enjoy things an awful lot. But I get annoyed with myself for being like this [having problems walking]."*



Figure 4: © Fourth Photo of the Photo Story

Experiencing freedom

Mr and Mrs Pieters elaborated on the meaning of “*experiencing freedom*” when explaining why they thought going for a walk was “*enjoyable*.” Experiencing freedom was different for each of them. For Mr Pieters it represented the possibility of choosing what to do, which was very important for him. He described this feeling as: “*We’re really spoilt because we can just see what the day brings.*” Going for a walk represented this freedom to choose: “*Yes, freedom to decide what you want to do, you can go whenever you want to go.*” Mrs Pieters reacted: “*My freedom is different. It’s not the freedom, like, nice, I can do this or maybe that [pause] uhm, how can I put it?*” [Pause]. He suggests “*Space?*” She replied: “*Space, yes, it’s nice that there’s no-one else, nothing in the way, no obstacles, no walls to get through, no battle to be fought, where you can be relaxed, just doing something.*” She explained that she could also have a feeling of freedom similar to her husband’s feeling of freedom when at home, when enjoying a day when nothing particular had to be done: “*That I can just choose what to do.*” But going for a walk meant something different: “*When I’m walking outside it’s just [pause] lovely the relaxation. I can’t explain it. There are no obstacles in the way here [at home] either, but I think I experience things differently outside in nature.*”



Figure 5: © Fifth Photo of the Photo Story

Being eager to come across new things

Going for a walk together provided an opportunity to be inquisitive and to come across new things. Mrs Pieters selected one particular photograph because it showed: “*What they’re going to find.*” When describing how she interpreted two photographs she explained:

I see this as liberty, freedom. And that [the other photograph] is [different]... you know where you’re going. That has always fascinated me. I think it’s much more fascinating not to know what’s behind the next hill [pause]. On other walks, in the mountains for example, I think it’s intriguing when you have to turn left when you thought you had to go straight on. Yes, things surprise you all the time. Here [in the other photograph] there’s nothing to surprise you at all. That’s it!



Figure 6: © Sixth Photo of the Photo Story

For Mr Pieters it was now also possible to see new things in a more limited space. He said: *"You don't need to go far away. Here, in my own surroundings, you can also be inquisitive. ...I can have the same experience [as going further afield] here, nearby."* He selected the photographs that showed variation. This had also influenced the choice of the little park where there was a variety in nature within a limited area that still made it possible to come across new things.



Figure 7: © Seventh Photo of the Photo Story

Discussion

Shared and personalised meanings

The first issue that emerges from our findings is that the themes all had a shared and a personalised aspect. In the first theme: 'Together but also individual', the shared meaning of being together is dominant, as was shown when they both, without hesitation or discussion and even by using the same words, chose the photograph with their arms linked that conveys the message of their being together. It became clear, however, that this strongly shared meaning was experienced in a personalised way. An illustration of this was the photograph that showed them looking in different directions (Figure 5). In the 'Experiencing freedom' theme, the personalised aspect was made explicit by the remark: "*I have a different freedom [from you].*" Similarly, both shared and personalised meanings were also apparent in the other two themes, with the shared meanings being comprised of the personal meanings.



Figure 8: © Eighth Photo of the Photo Story

This was similar to the meanings uncovered in a study that explored the lived experience of adults whose activities had been disrupted (Reed et al., 2010). For one participant in that study, the meaning of going for a walk together was dependent on the person with whom the co-occupation was undertaken. Its shared meaning was ‘being with’: with one friend this was personalised as getting away and getting lost in conversation, while what stood out with another friend was the experience of enjoying nature. Shared and personalised meanings were also apparent in our earlier case study of an older couple’s experience. The metaphor that expressed how they experienced their everyday activities after the woman’s stroke was ‘One body, three hands and two minds’ (Van Nes et al., 2009). The two minds indicated that both spouses experienced personalised meanings, while at the same time this couple experienced their everyday activities as if they were performed by their ‘one body and with three hands.’

Meaning creation from a transactional perspective

Several authors have advocated a transactional perspective as being suitable to understand how the relationship between persons and their environments has implications for their occupations (Aldrich, 2008; Cutchin et al., 2008; Dickie et al., 2006). A transactional perspective regards experience as an active process that consists of mutual influences between persons and their environments. It holds that an “understanding of individual experience is a necessary but *insufficient* condition” (Dickie et al., 2006, p. 83) for understanding how people experience their activities. In a transactional approach, the person and the environment can be distinguished, but neither of these two elements is considered to cause effects in the other. Instead, person and context are constantly changing and co-constituting one another in a holistic transaction process (Brinkmann, 2011; Garrison, 2001).

Transactional approaches have been used in analyses of person-place transaction. For example, Shank and Cutchin (2010) studied, from a transactive perspective, the experiences of older women who continued living in their own homes. Meaning was seen as being derived from the relationships between the women and their environment and as negotiated through the process of change in person or place.

We consider that our findings exemplify transaction in the process of meaning creation, because we found the shared and personalised meanings to be co-constituted and created by the spouses together. There were no causal relations in this process — it was a flexible process of meaning-making. An example of this can be found in how the spouses talked about what ‘experiencing freedom’ means. It was not only the case that they knew that the other had a different freedom; it was also clear that the husband supported his wife in expressing this meaning by suggesting it meant space, a suggestion she then further elaborated on. There were also several instances of this flexibility in the meaning-making process in the photograph selection. For example when the woman selected a photograph because it showed “*not knowing what comes next*”, she expressed this as being surprised and he expressed this discovering new things as being inquisitive.

Our findings showed transaction in the process of meaning creation, but also brought the personalised meanings to the fore. The shared and personalised meanings of co-occupation could be considered the 'outcome' of the transactional processes between the two spouses. While the couple shared the same context, had been married to each other for a long time, and performed the same co-occupation, the personalised meanings were still important and needed in order to understand the meanings of this co-occupation: going for a walk together.

Maintaining continuity

The 'it has always been like that' theme illustrated the importance of maintaining continuity. This finding is congruent with the central ideas of continuity theory (Atchley, 1989), i.e. that ageing adults actively construct and use enduring patterns of activity to enhance life satisfaction and to adapt to change (Atchley, 1999). Although they could perform the occupation in a different way, as they could no longer walk lengthy distances in an unknown environment, in their co-occupation they experienced continuity of the meanings that they had also cherished earlier in their life. We suggest that this continuity of meanings contributed to internal continuity and thereby to preserving their identity (Atchley, 1989; Christiansen, 1999). The woman, for example, perceived herself as being a person that liked to "take unknown paths", and she still perceived this in her walk in the little park. Other studies have also demonstrated how occupation contributes to identity, such as a study employing a life-course perspective to understand the role of occupation in ageing among late-life women (Tatzer, Van Nes, & Jonsson, 2011).

In addition to the importance of maintaining continuity for the identities of the two spouses involved in this co-occupation, we suggest that the process of creating meaning also contributed to their identity as a couple. In the psychological literature, couple identity has been described as the other person being perceived as part of the self and the relationship between the other and the self as also being part of self (Acitelli, Rogers, & Knee, 1999). Badr, Acitelli and Taylor (2007) concluded in a caregiving couple study that viewing the relationship as an extension of oneself may help to reduce the negative effects of caregiving on the caregiver. Another study conceptualised couple identity as 'we-ness', which demonstrated how interventions

supporting the couple's we-ness increased the relationship satisfaction, which was considered important, because evidence suggests that a well-functioning marriage is associated with good health (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001; Reid, Dalton, Laderoute, Doell, & Nguyen, 2006).

Defining co-occupation

Our findings led us to reconsider the current conceptualizations of co-occupation. We consider Pickens & Pizur-Barnekow's (2009) to be the most comprehensive definition. It holds that co-occupation is embedded in shared meaning and involves aspects of shared physicality, emotionality and intentionality. Based on our finding of a constellation of shared and personalised meanings, we suggest that co-occupation is not necessarily embedded in shared meaning. In line with this, we suggest that intentionality may also have shared and personalised aspects. We saw in our couple that both spouses clearly had the shared intention of going for a walk together. However, we also found on the meanings level that the 'outcome' of this intention was different for both.

In our study, the co-occupation of going for a walk together involved shared physicality. In Pierce's (2009) conceptualisation, shared physicality is not needed, because the presence of interaction between the participants is the defining characteristic. In line with this, shared time and space are not needed either. However, we would argue that to enhance the understanding of co-occupation the aspect of shared space needs to be present. Otherwise it will be difficult to differentiate between co-occupations and other occupations that have a social element. A social element is, for example, evident when family members coordinate the timing of their everyday occupations, as happens in many family activities, but we would not advocate including all these everyday occupations under the umbrella of co-occupation.

In conclusion, the concept of co-occupation is not unproblematic and is in need of an ongoing dialogue to enhance the understanding and conceptualisation of this specific type of occupation. Further theoretical and empirical work is needed. Our present tentative definition of co-occupation would suggest restricting the concept

of co-occupation to encompass everyday occupations performed together by two or more people, involving shared time and space and involving both shared and personalised meanings.

Implications and future research

For this couple, being together had a strong positive meaning experienced in their co-occupation. In other studies, doing activities together was not always —or only— perceived as a positive way of being with another person (e.g. Van Nes et al., 2009; Vikström et al., 2008). We therefore suggest that future studies are needed to specifically study co-occupation in couples who experience stress, burden or abuse.

Our findings indicate that understanding the meanings of co-occupation requires a focus on the shared and on the personalised meanings. However, further study is warranted to examine how the personalised meanings are related to the shared meanings and how the meaning creation process is mediated by the experiences of linked lives. We expect that the meaning creation processes operate differently in dyads that do not have a long and close shared life. Future studies could explore these processes in recent relationships in late life and also in other phases of the life course.

In addition to being theoretically important, studies that focus on co-occupation in closely linked dyads might also support the development of interventions to assist dyads to deal with health conditions effecting the everyday occupations of one or both partners. In addition to understanding meanings in co-occupation, basic cognitive and physical processes (such as synchronicity) that enable a fluid performance of co-occupations should be studied (Knoblich, Butterfill, & Sebanz, 2011). This knowledge might be useful to understanding the potential for change in the performance of co-occupations of two people when they are no longer able to perform their co-occupations in the way they did in the past.

Strengths and limitations

As with all qualitative research case studies, the transferability of the findings to other contexts is limited. The socio-cultural context, this couple's life experiences and other contextual factors all influenced the meanings they gave to their co-occupation. This would probably have been different in other cultures and contexts. However, we maintain that while it is not possible to generalize to other contexts, another form of generalization is possible, namely "generalization through recognition of patterns" (Larsson, 2009, p. 33). In this form of generalization the findings (theoretical constructions, concepts or descriptions) of interpretational research are considered to be ways of seeing. Researchers could recognize in new empirical cases similar patterns, which could further develop understanding.

The trustworthiness of our study was established by employing different data collection methods (interviews and photo elicitation), which made triangulation possible. Firstly, the use of both individual and joint interviews and the protracted data gathering period enhanced the trustworthiness by generating rich data. The photographs were taken by a third party. This can be considered a strength, because it made it possible to elicit data concerning the meanings of the co-occupation with the photographs that showed the phenomenon itself. Seeing in photographs how they had engaged in their co-occupation stimulated vivid recall of the experience of going for a walk together.

The couple took a very active role in the photograph selection process. We consider this to be a strength because the couple contributed considerably to the analyses. On the other hand, when they moved the photographs to their side of the table, monitoring, observing and taking notes became challenging. At that point they stopped talking about their reasons for not selecting particular photographs. Because of this, we could not extend the analyses by including motivations of photographs that were *not* selected. However, the selection process as a whole did facilitate sense-making when the couple discussed the meanings they attributed to the photographs by comparing them. Furthermore, the 'give and take' between them contributed to a deeper understanding of differences and similarities in the perspectives of each partner.

Conclusion

The meanings of co-occupation were found to be a complex constellation consisting of shared and personalised meanings. The meanings of co-occupation were created by the people involved together and mediated by their shared and personal values. The findings of our study further suggest the importance of continuity of meanings of co-occupation for maintaining both individual and couple identities. Future studies are needed to further investigate the complexities of co-occupations. When co-occupation plays a role in maintaining couple identity it may have a positive influence on the functioning of the couple. We suggest that maintaining meaningful co-occupations might contribute to health and well-being in late life, because for many people doing things together with their significant others might be close to their heart and to their experience of a good life.

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